

Putting Agrippina in her place: Tacitus and imperial women

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Agrippina (wife of Claudius and mother of Nero) is portrayed by ancient authors, especially Tacitus, as ambitious and domineering, exploiting her privileged position to the full. These colourful stories are often seen as offering tantalizing glimpses of a formidable individual. They may, however, tell us more about the attitudes of the senatorial elite to the principate as an institution. And what exactly was the position of the emperor's wife – or his mother?

Classical scholars, in their more unbuttoned moments, sometimes swap thoughts as to which ancient text, now lost, they would most love to get their hands on. For quite a few, it is a book referred to by the historian Tacitus, whose *Annals*, written in the late first century/early second century, concern the history of Rome under the Julio-Claudians. Tacitus mentions a tantalizing work, lost to us today:

the commentaries of the younger Agrippina, written when her son Nero was emperor, in which she recorded for posterity her life and the vicissitudes of her family.

Agrippina was great-granddaughter of Augustus, sister of Caligula, wife of Claudius, and mother of Nero. She will surely have had an interesting perspective on the history of the early principate. As it is, we have to rely on accounts of her written by others, most notably Tacitus himself. His portrait of domineering and devious Agrippina has captured the imagination of many readers. I shall argue that, to appreciate the significance of this character as she appears in Tacitus, we need to understand both the quasi-official position of women of the imperial family and the complex concerns their position provoked in many Romans.

Women in the imperial family

At least some female members of the imperial family had a status and power that was officially sanctioned. Livia, wife of Rome's first emperor, Augustus (and Agrippina's great-grandmother), has been

described as fully involved in the public life of the Augustan state. This represented an enormous change from the situation under the republic where aristocratic women might exercise influence behind the scenes but they had no officially recognised role, except in relation to a small number of religious cults. As more and more business came to be transacted in the imperial residence rather than the senate house, it is not surprising that the way was open for the emperor's wife to play a more significant role, nor that her power was sometimes recognised as legitimate – particularly by those who hoped she might use it on their behalf. Livia is said to have interceded to plead for conspirators against Augustus. Embassies and petitions were regularly addressed to her.

When Augustus died and was deified in A.D. 14, Livia became his principal priestess. Her public role continued – perhaps not surprising given that the new emperor, Tiberius, was her son. Interestingly, a pattern begins to emerge. Honours were quite regularly bestowed on female members of the imperial family by later emperors. Caligula granted his three sisters (including Agrippina) numerous privileges. They were also commemorated in coinage (*sestertius* of Caligula of A.D. 37/8 and 39). The biographer Suetonius (who lived around the same time as Tacitus and wrote the *Lives of Twelve Caesars*, starting with Julius) sees these honours as an attempt by Caligula to gain popularity, which implies that they were widely seen as entirely appropriate.

Agrippina – a powerful woman

Caligula was succeeded by his uncle Claudius, who then married Agrippina (his niece!). Claudius issued coins celebrating his mother (the niece of Augustus), and he also deified Livia, who was his own grandmother. Agrippina appears on the obverse of some coins from his reign; a coin of 49 is the first instance of an imperial wife being portrayed with her husband on a gold coin. Indeed Agrippina occupies a more prominent role in coinage than any other woman of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Following the accession of her son Nero, coins show his bust and hers paired (see image on previous page).

Monuments from the provinces also acknowledge her importance. The Sebasteion temple complex honouring the Roman emperors, living and dead, at Aphrodisias (in modern Turkey) includes spectacular relief depictions of members of the imperial family. Panels show Claudius and Agrippina (depicted as the goddess Demeter) joining hands, a symbol of marital harmony (see right). Elsewhere Agrippina is shown wearing a diadem and crowning Nero with laurel (see below right) – a very conspicuous assertion of her role in transmitting power to her son. Nero was adopted by Claudius but his claim to the empire was underpinned by the fact that, through his mother, he was great-great-grandson to Augustus.

The principate: a new importance for women of the imperial family

The public nature of imperial women's roles needs to be seen as in part consequence of the shift of power from the senate to the palace. But it is also an acknowledgement of the crucial role women occupy when power is transmitted through inheritance. The inherited nature of the principate emerged only gradually. Augustus had no sons of his own and the succession of power was never straightforward; subsequent Julio-Claudian emperors were descended either from his wife Livia or his daughter Julia. Imperial

dynastic ideology had to accord an important and public role to certain women.

There is plenty of evidence to support the view that these women were publicly marked out as figures who legitimately exercised power (at least to a degree). This aspect of the role of Julio-Claudian women provoked mixed responses in ancient writers. Tacitus (and other authors) sometimes seems to imply that any female influence is illegitimate. It is striking that, to judge from Tacitus' account in particular, women in the imperial family are virtually always transgressive. Essentially they conform to two types: scheming and ambitious on the one hand, like Livia and Agrippina; driven only by lust on the other (for example Augustus' daughter Julia, his granddaughter Julia, and Claudius' wife Messalina, Agrippina's predecessor).

Livia – the imperial matriarch

Tacitus presents Livia as masterminding the selection of her own son Tiberius as Augustus' heir. She exercises an even greater influence over Tiberius once he is emperor. Livia is said to have publicized the fact that it was through her doing that Tiberius was emperor – in order to increase her hold over him. Tacitus describes her as 'a compliant wife but an overbearing mother'. There were even rumours that Livia had been responsible for dispensing with inconvenient members of her husband's family through poison (Augustus' grandsons, Gaius and Lucius, whom he had adopted as his sons, both died young).

Agrippina – the new Livia?

Tacitus suggests a sinister parallel between Agrippina's career and that of her great-grandmother Livia (there is an implicit link between them at *Annals* 5.1 and an explicit comparison at the end of book 12). The masculine nature of Agrippina's ambition is particularly evident. Tacitus observes:

From this moment the state was transformed. Complete obedience was accorded to a woman – and not a woman like Messalina who toyed with national affairs to satisfy her appetites. This was a rigorous, almost masculine despotism. In public Agrippina was austere and often arrogant. Her private life was chaste – unless power was to be gained. Her passion to acquire money was unbounded. She wanted it as a stepping stone to supremacy.
(Ann. 12.7.5)

After persuading Claudius to adopt her son Nero and make him heir – in prefer-

ence to Claudius' own son Britannicus – Agrippina allegedly poisoned her husband and made arrangements to secure the smooth transition of power to Nero.

She is also shown dominating her son Nero. She tries to become co-ruler. The senate meets in a room in the Palatine with:

a door built at the back so that she could stand behind the curtain unseen and listen. Again when an Armenian delegation was pleading before Nero, she was about to mount the emperor's dais and sit beside him. Everyone was stupefied. But Seneca instructed Nero to advance and meet his mother. This show of filial dutifulness averted the scandal.

(Tac. Ann. 13.5)

Agrippina's position was widely known – and resented, claims Tacitus, commenting: 'Everyone longed for the mother's domination to end' (Ann. 14.2). Nero hated his mother so much, according to Tacitus, that he attempted to kill her and was eventually successful. Tacitus quotes from a letter allegedly written to the senate after her death, in which Nero accuses his mother of plotting against him:

He added the older charges: 'she had wanted to be co-ruler – to receive oaths of allegiance from the guard, and to subject senate and public to the same humiliation'.

(Ann. 14.11)

These two formidable women Livia and Agrippina have quite a bit in common, it appears.

Agrippina's behaviour flagrantly violates tradition. The British chieftain Caratacus and his family are set free by Claudius:

Released from their chains, they offered Agrippina, conspicuous seated on another dais nearby, the same homage and gratitude that they had given to the emperor. That a woman should sit before Roman standards was a novelty. She was asserting her partnership in the empire her ancestors had won.

(12.37.4)

Ancestry, it seems, is something which might be thought (though clearly not by Tacitus!) to legitimate a woman's power. But how much power did these women really have? We should remember that their positions were invariably contingent. Once emperor, Nero could reject his mother leaving her friendless and without resources (even if many thought he went too far in actually having her killed...).

The historians' prejudice?

What both 'types' of Julio-Claudian female (the licentious and the domineering) have in common is that they are not sufficiently subject to masculine control. There are striking family resemblances (such as that between Agrippina and Livia). However, this may have more to do with how Roman writers (almost all of whom champion the interests of the senate) make sense of the principate than with inherited traits. Under the principate, heredity – in particular who your mother was – had become of critical significance. We can, I think, see the fixation of Tacitus (and of other elite male writers) with the excesses of these Julio-Claudian females as a way of expressing profound concern at the hereditary nature of power under the principate. These colourful stories of women who don't know their place need to be seen as Roman attempts to make sense of – and marginalize – a deeply threatening phenomenon.

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